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FOR GENERAL ABIZAID FROM AMBASSADOR DINGER
CANBERRA AND WELLINGTON PLEASE PASS TO CENTCOM POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/22/2016
TAGS: MARR PREL PGOV FJ US
SUBJECT: SCENE SETTER FOR GENERAL ABIZAID'S FEBRUARY 25
VISIT TO FIJI

Classified By: Ambassador Larry Dinger; Sec. 1.5 (D) and (E)

¶1. (C) We look forward to your short visit to Fiji. It comes in the run-up to national elections, which could take place as early as late April. It is also a time of very difficult civil-military relations. Tensions between the government and military have been at a near-boiling point for months with Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander (Navy Commodore) Frank Bainimarama (bai ni ma RAH ma) making numerous veiled threats to replace the government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase (ng ah RAH say) over acts and policies Bainimarama says are corrupt, racist, or intended to forgive past acts of treason. The government and military have also sparred over the military's involvement in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq, with the government giving the green light last fall for an additional deployment only after protracted internal negotiations and additional funding from Australia. In your meetings (we hope with Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi (Man DRY we we), Qarase, and Bainimarama), you will have the opportunity to explore the possibility of having Fiji join the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq. With Bainimarama you should also emphasize the proper role of the military in a democratic society.

The Political Background

¶2. (C) The current tension between the government and military is in the context of a "coup culture" in Fiji. The RFMF executed two coups in 1987. In May 2000, a group of nationalist Fijian civilians removed the democratically elected government headed by Indo-Fijian Mahendra Chaudhry, with help from some dissident elements of the RFMF. The RFMF, under Bainimarama, eventually resolved the situation, with Chaudhry still deposed, and installed Qarase as interim PM. In November 2000, dissident RFMF elements made an attempt on Bainimarama's life during a failed mutiny. In general elections in 2001, Qarase was elected PM. He and Bainimarama have been at loggerheads much of the time since. In late 2003, Qarase attempted to deny Bainimarama a second term as Commander RFMF; but President Iloilo declined to follow the PM's advice. According to Fiji's Constitution, only the President can remove the military commander.

¶3. (C) In 2005, Qarase introduced a controversial "Reconciliation, Truth, and Unity Bill" (aka "the Bill") to ostensibly heal old wounds and bring the country together. The Bill has had just the opposite effect, highlighting the schisms that continue to exist between Fiji's indigenous and

Indo-Fijian communities and bringing civil-military strains out into the open. The USG and many others criticized the Bill's amnesty provisions and impositions on judicial roles. Bainimarama is the Bill's biggest critic, arguing that its amnesty provisions could lead to the release or exoneration of participants in the coup and mutiny, and as such would "reward treason." A Parliamentary committee suggested changes that address some, but not all, of the Bill's faults.

Qarase has put the Bill on hold, and it may not arise again until after the elections. Nevertheless, Bainimarama remains highly critical of the Bill and openly skeptical of the Qarase government's intentions. In recent weeks, Bainimarama has reiterated his oft-stated threat that the military will take (unspecified) actions to ensure the Bill is not made into law and implemented.

Government and Military at an Impasse

¶4. (C) In mid-January, then-Land Force Commander Baledrokadroka asked Bainimarama to step down, alleging that the Commodore had gone beyond the bounds in his threats toward the Government. Bainimarama, in turn, accused Baledrokadroka of conspiring with the Government to oust him from the military leadership. The showdown ended with Baledrokadroka's resignation. Soon after, Vice President Madraiwiwi mediated a meeting between Bainimarama and the PM (the first in many months) in which both sides agreed to tone down the rhetoric and hold regular meetings. Bainimarama agreed to share his views with the PM instead of going straight to the media, while the PM agreed to include the Commander in National Security Council meetings and deal with him directly on matters of national security. Bainimarama's titular superior, the Minister of Home Affairs, appears to have been cut out of the loop.

¶5. (C) This arrangement has not lessened Bainimarama's distaste for the current government. In a February 14 letter to Vice President Madraiwiwi (not made public), the Commander called for the delay of elections until after a census is conducted. He said that, without a census (now about a year overdue), "the upcoming elections will not be contested on a fair and democratic basis and it will deprive the people of Fiji a truly democratically elected government." (Note: a number of independent observers we have talked to believe conducting a census is impractical at this point and are satisfied that the coming elections will be reasonably fair. End note.) Perhaps recognizing a census could not be completed before the constitutionally-mandated election deadline, Bainimarama also reportedly asked the Vice President to convince the President to dissolve Parliament and put in place an interim government, actions that the President reportedly does not believe he has the constitutional authority to take. Additionally, the Embassy has a copy of an unsigned, undated think piece, apparently drafted by or for the RFMF, on possible extra-constitutional options and justifications. The document refers to the Pakistan/Musharraf "doctrine of necessity" model as precedent.

¶6. (C) In recent days, Bainimarama, via a spokesman, has signaled that the RFMF could invoke the "doctrine of necessity" to keep Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) from installing a person implicated in the 2000 coup as Fiji's next President in March. Current President Iloilo has indicated he is prepared to stay on for a second term; however, Qarase is rumored to want someone different, someone who will stand up to Bainimarama and remove him if the PM so requests. One possible candidate is Ratu Jope Seniloli, a high chief and former Vice President, who is currently in jail on 2000-related charges.

¶7. (C) Bainimarama and Qarase may now both be in situations of rolling the dice. For the PM, to continue on the course toward an early election carries a risk of rapidly triggering a Bainimarama reaction. To attempt to delay the election in order to hold a census and appease Bainimarama, on the other hand, may not be legal. It would also be a sign of glaring political weakness. For the Commander, ordering his troops

to take illegal action against the government risks their refusal to follow. If he were to succeed, the Commander knows such an action would trigger international negative reaction detrimental to Fiji's military reputation and its tourism economy.

The RFMF in Iraq

¶8. (C) In the meantime, Fiji troops have acquitted themselves very well in Iraq in support of UNAMI. They have a long and laudatory PKO history, most notably in Lebanon and the Sinai. In 2004, 200 Fiji troops were deployed in Iraq, a 155-man guard unit and a 45-man personal security detachment. In 2005, Fiji renewed its UNAMI commitment and authorized adding 110 troops for positions in Erbil and Basra. The additional RFMF troops have trained and are ready to deploy. However, the UN has not yet given the mission a green light.

¶9. (C) The RFMF is dissatisfied with current UNAMI arrangements, which in the RFMF view, do not allow it to use the peacekeeping skills it has developed over many years of involvement in PKO missions. After Bainimarama visited Iraq in December, he informed us he believes Fiji troops could contribute more by participating in the Coalition, in addition to meeting current UNAMI commitments. He has proposed sending a platoon (starting small), but the Government has not yet responded. Bainimarama believes Coalition participation would provide unique training opportunities and enhance the skills of his troops.

Themes For Your Visit

¶10. (C) From our perspective your visit should have two main themes. First, Iraq:

Commodore Bainimarama has invited you to make the case to the Government of Fiji for an RFMF deployment to the Coalition of the Willing.

-- Please express to each interlocutor our deep thanks for Fiji's exceptional contributions to peacekeeping operations throughout the world, including via UNAMI in Iraq. Then discuss the usefulness of Fiji deploying at least some troops in Iraq as a Coalition partner.

-- Fiji's civilian leaders appreciate that RFMF and Fiji Police contributions to peacekeeping operations burnish Fiji's international reputation and contribute to a more peaceful and prosperous world. This CENTCOM visit, in itself, strongly accents the message that the U.S. values Fiji's contributions.

-- The RFMF's budget has been a political issue. It will be important to flag to the civilian leadership how the costs of an RFMF deployment to the Coalition would be covered.

¶11. (C) Second theme: military-civilian relations in a democracy:

Given the ongoing tensions in Fiji, we believe it essential for senior U.S. military visitors to reiterate to Commodore Bainimarama the USG view of civil-military relations. Bainimarama is well aware that the U.S. believes the military in a democracy must abide by civilian control. This is nowhere more true than in a nation like Fiji with its "coup culture" history. Bainimarama knows that illegally removing a lawfully elected civilian government will trigger a cut off of USG military-assistance programs, as has happened before here. He knows, as well, that a coup would strongly affect Fiji's tourism-based economy. While the themes have been delivered before, we believe the timing of this visit, in the context of the RFMF's very recent "doctrine of necessity" comments, requires finding an opportunity to raise the subject and deliver the clear message:

-- No matter the Commodore's strongly held dissatisfactions

with the Qarase Government and his deep worries about the coming elections, he must work within the civilian-led political system. If the civilians cannot, or are not willing to, accommodate military concerns, the civilian view still must win.

-- Any RFMF actions to disrupt the constitutional processes in Fiji, no matter how sincere the motive, will do great harm to Fiji's international relationships, including bilateral U.S.- Fiji relations, and, under U.S. law, must result in a suspension of military assistance.

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